

# The Rise of Overt Expletives in Early English

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## 1. Introduction

In Old (OE) and Middle English (ME) expletives were variably overt or absent with a finite *that*-clause associate:

- (1) swa eac geriseþ, [þæt se ealdor eal gestyhtige]  
so also befits that the elder all arranges  
'So it is also proper that the elder arranges everything'  
(cobenrul, BenR:3.15.16.226)
- (2) Ac **hit** geriseð, [þæt þa geongran þam ylðrum hyren]  
but EXPL befits that the young the old hear  
'But it is proper that the young obey the old'  
(cobenrul, BenR:3.15.16.226)

Overt expletives gradually increased in OE and ME:

period	overt expletive	no overt expletive	% overt
OE1	185	102	64.46
OE2	151	42	78.24
ME1	27	7	79.41
ME2	126	20	86.30

$\chi^2=27.44$ ,  $df=3$ ,  
 $p<0.0001$

Table 1: Frequencies of overt vs. no overt expletives, active verbs, with a finite *that*-clause

Central questions:

- How should the development of overt expletives be analysed?
- What caused the introduction of overt expletives?
- What evidence is there for the proposed analysis?

## 2. Proposed Analysis

Originally, OE verbs could subcategorize for thematic clausal subjects. Subjects could occur in a pre-verbal subject position (as in Modern English), remain in a lower, post-verbal position, topicalize or extrapose. English developed a rigid, "canonical", pre-verbal subject position. In other words, English developed fixed SV order. However, clausal subjects could never be licensed in the now rigidly pre-verbal subject position. Therefore, clausal subjects were pushed out of the theta grid and overt expletives developed as a repair strategy to mediate between matrix predicate and thematic clause.

### 3. Evidence

#### 3.1. Rise of Fixed Subject Position

The “canonical”, pre-verbal subject position of Modern English was not necessarily filled with the subject in Early English. It could remain “empty” (3), be filled with a non-subject pronoun (4), or a predicative element (5). The subject occurs lower in the clause.

- (3) ... swa þæt \_\_\_ næs    **þæt scip** betwyh   þam yþum gesewen  
... so that    not-was    that ship between the waves seen  
‘... so that the ship could not be seen between the waves’  
(cogregdC,GDPref\_and\_3\_[C]:36.248.26.3516)
- (4) ... þt him    machte **alswich** bitiden.  
... that him might all-such    betide  
‘... that all such things might happen to him’  
(CMANCRIW-1,II.204.2921)
- (5) ... þæt þæs folces    sceolde **micel hryre** beon,  
... that the people’s should    much ruin    be  
‘... that great destruction should be [with] the people’  
(coorosiu,Or\_4:1.85.6.1714)

The rise of a fixed subject position can be measured by comparing the number of subordinate clauses with an auxiliary, non-finite verb and a full subject that follows the finite verb (3-5) with all subordinate clauses with an auxiliary, non-finite verb and a full subject.

period	all subordinate clauses	post-verbal subject	% post-verbal subject	$\chi^2 = 167.29, df=3, p < 0.0001$
OE1	868	115	13.25	
OE2	996	94	9.44	
ME1	245	7	2.86	
ME2	1531	14	0.91	

Table 2: Frequency of subordinate clauses with post-verbal subjects

Post-verbal subjects decline; the preverbal subject position becomes generalized. By the end of late Middle English, the language is essentially fixed SV.

#### 3.2. Clausal Subjects

There is some independent evidence for clausal subjects in OE: clausal subjects, but not associates of expletives, are allowed in post-verbal position with bi-sentential verbs (*mean, prove*). A sentence such as (6) must therefore contain a clausal subject.

- (6) & eft is [**ðæt mon blissige & ne blissige**] [ðæt mon ahebbe his mod]  
and again is that one bliss and not bliss that one arise his mind  
‘and again, [that a man rejoices and yet does not rejoice] means [that he exalts his mind]’  
(cocura,CP:51.395.23.2685)

### 3. 3. Dative Experiencers

Lexicon entries specifying arguments with a more prominent thematic role than the clausal THEME should not appear with expletives. The reason is that the thematically more prominent argument should be mapped onto the subject function and “shield” the clausal THEME from being demoted. In early English dative EXPERIENCERS are thematically more prominent than clausal THEME.

- (7) þeah þe nu þince þæt ðu deorwyrðe feoh forloren habbe,  
 Although **you.DAT** now seems that you dear property lost have  
 ‘Although it may seem to you now that you have lost precious property’  
 (coboeth,Bo:20.48.17.870)

The dative EXPERIENCER functions as the subject: OE patterns with Icelandic not with German in respect to coordination of nominative and dative arguments:

(8) a. *German*

\*Er [~~er~~ sagt von sich fleißig zu sein], aber [~~ihm~~ käme die Aufgabe zu schwer vor.]  
 he.NOM says of self diligent to be, but him.DAT find. the task.NOM too hard PT

b. *Icelandic*

Hann [~~hann~~ segist vera duglegur,] en [~~honum~~ finnst verkefnið of þungt.]  
 he.NOM says-self be diligent, but him.DAT finds the-work.NOM too hard  
 ‘He says to be diligent, but finds the homework too hard’ (from: Wunderlich 2003)

c. *Old English*

hie [hie onfooð ðære lare sua micle lusðlicor] & [him sua micle ma scamiað hiera unðeawes]  
 they.NOM receive the lore so much gladder and them.DAT so much more shames their fault  
 ‘they will receive the advice so much more gladly [...] and [they] will be so much more ashamed of their fault.’ (cocura,CP:40.293.21.1939) (similarly Allen 1986)

As expected, the presence of a dative EXPERIENCER significantly reduces the probability of overt expletives:

period	overt expletive	no overt expletive	% overt
OE1	1	279	0.36
OE2	4	190	2.06
ME1	2	28	6.67
ME2	8	96	7.69

Comparison:  
 table 1 vs. table 3  
 $\chi^2=15.26$ ,  $df=1$ ,  
 $p<0.0001$

Table 3: Frequencies of overt vs. no overt expletives for verbs with a finite clause and a dative experiencer

### 3. 4. Absence of PP EXPERIENCERS without Expletives

The development from dative to PP coding is relatively late. The fixation of a “canonical”, pre-verbal subject position is relatively early. Therefore, lexicon entries with a PP EXPERIENCER and a clausal subject should be unstable / non-existent. This expectation is borne out: There is only one single example with a PP EXPERIENCER and no overt expletive in the early English corpora.

### 3. 5. *That*-trace Effects

*That*-trace effects, i.e. the impossibility to extract a subject from a clause that is introduced by a complementizer like *that* (Perlmutter 1971), arise in Modern English because there is a “canonical”, pre-verbal subject position. You cannot extract from that position, but from other positions.

- (9) a. John said that Mary read a book.  
b. What did John say that Mary read \_\_\_ ?  
c. \*Who did John say that \_\_\_ read a book?

If expletives come into being as English develops a fixed, “canonical” pre-verbal subject position, *that*-trace effects should be absent at first and then develop in parallel with the development of this rigid subject position.

This prediction is met: It is possible to extract subjects out of *that*-clauses in early English (10-12):

- (10) ...fela þæra fortacna þe Crist sylf foresæde [þæt \_\_\_ cuman scolde]  
...many of.the fore-tokens that Christ self fore-said [that come should]  
'...many of the omens that Christ himself foretold (\*that) \_\_ would come'  
(cowulf,WHom\_6:196.371)
- (11) ...ælcum þara þe he ongyt þæt him on eallum mode to gecyrreð.  
...each of.those who he understands that him in all minds to turn  
'...each of those who he understands (\*that) \_\_ turn to him in all situations'  
(coverhom,HomS\_34\_[ScraggVerc\_19]:145.2520)
- (12) ...ðone wisdom ðe him selfum ðyncð ðætte wisdom sie,  
... the wisdom which him self seems that wisdom is  
'...the wisdom which he thinks (\*that) \_\_\_ is wisdom.'  
(cocura,CP:30.203.13.1364)

Subject extraction without *that*-trace effects decline significantly from OE (26.1%) to ME (12.3%) ( $\chi^2=4.46$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Furthermore, *that*-trace effects do not occur precisely in the contexts where post-verbal subjects are possible in Old English (compare (10) to (3), (11) to (4), (12) to (5)).

## References

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